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U.S. criticism mounts against Sandinistas as election day nears

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WASHINGTON — The Reagan administration escalated its rhetorical attacks against Nicaragua's leftist government Tuesday, denouncing as meaningless Sunday's election for president, vice president and a 90-member constituent assembly.

At the same time, White House officials disclosed that President Reagan had taken time out from his own election campaigning to preside over a National Security Council review of the situation in Central America.

With the Nicaraguan voting only five days away, the State Department released a 19-page document on the elections which said they would "offer no choice at all. The promise of free elections the Sandinistas made to the Nicaraguan people and to the world before they seized power [in 1979] will remain unfulfilled."

The Nicaraguan Embassy dismissed the accusations as part of an effort to discredit the voting which is expected to give an easy victory to Daniel Ortega, the Sandinista candidate who is also the leader of the country's ruling junta.

"Obviously," said embassy spokeswoman Miriam Hooker, "this is part of the American campaign against Nicaragua. It shows how U.S. policy is flip-flopping. First, they tell us to have elections and now that we will have elections they tell us that they are a farce. What the Reagan administration really wants is to overthrow the government of Nicaragua."

The State Department said that although the United States supports elections in Central America, in this case it backed Nicaraguan opposition demands to postpone the balloting until the Sandinistas guaranteed they would be "free and fair."

The report accused the Sandinistas of using the election to gain "international legitimacy for their

revolution" and to secure increased economic aid from the West. In fact, said the document, the vote would "differ little from the elections conducted by the Somoza regime."

The Somoza family controlled Nicaragua for more than four decades until the Sandinista-led insurgency ousted President Anastasio Somoza from office in July 1979.

Sandinista leaders have accused the United States of offering opposition parties up to \$300,000 each to refrain from participating in Sunday's election. State Department spokesman John Hughes denied the charge.

Hughes also denied critics' charges that a CIA-produced manual for contras, as anti-Sandinista Nicaraguan rebels are known, proved that the main goal of the administration is to overthrow the Managua government.

Much of the attention concerning the manual since its existence was first disclosed two weeks ago has centered on its recommendation for the "selective use of violence" against Sandinista officials.

But the manual also gives advice on how the rebels might take over the government.

In Congress, the House and Senate intelligence oversight committees, which earlier had indicated they would hold hearings on the manual this week, said Tuesday that those sessions may not take place until after the U.S. presidential election.

In a further indication of U.S. concern on Nicaragua, an administration official volunteered that Reagan had taken time out from his own campaign to preside over the NSC meeting on Central America.

The official said CIA, Pentagon and State Department briefers reviewed for Reagan the "current state of play" in the region, including the Oct. 19 deaths of Salvadoran military leaders in a helicopter crash.